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# A NATURALIST VIEW OF HUMILIATION<sup>1</sup>

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## *abstract*

*A naturalist analysis of humiliation begins with the notion of social interaction, a public encounter with other people. Interactions are an essential element in cooperation, a vital condition of survival and well-being. In the course of interaction the person presents himself as someone possessing the qualities necessary for successful cooperation. An act of humiliation is designed to inflict damage on the agent's self-presentation. Any such damage would be a sign that the agent is not successful in conducting the given interaction. Such damage would tend to decrease of cooperative value of the humiliated individual and to decrease his chances of survival and reproduction.*

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## *keywords*

*naturalism, humiliation, embarrassment, social pain, humour*

- 1. Introduction** It is prohibited to humiliate a person. A humiliating, degrading treatment of an individual by another individual, or an institution, constitutes a serious moral transgression. The task is to understand the nature of humiliation, to explicate its concept, and to discover the reasons behind the prohibition. Some theorists writing on this topic favour a broadly Kantian solution<sup>2</sup>. Each human being, in virtue of his capacity to act rationally and the related capacity to act morally, has an intrinsic worth. The purpose of an act of humiliation is to deny him his worth. Every humiliating act is literally inhumane: in humiliating someone we treat him as a non-human—a beast perhaps, or an inanimate object. Every action directed toward another individual, including a punishing action, must include a minimal dose of respect, a respect of him as a human being.
- This solution faces two major difficulties. (1) Not every act of humiliation destroys humanity, or can even be plausibly said to attack humanity, i.e. either humanity as a universal or just the human nature of the particular individual. Taunting or ridiculing someone is a typical case of humiliation, but it is not at all clear why any such act should be taken to be an assault on humanity. While insults are often humiliating, can they really represent an assault on human dignity? (2) Being humiliated is a painful experience (in some sense of ‘pain’, more on which below). It seems, however, that the Kantian account does not assign any explanatory role to the psychological suffering of the victims of humiliation. It seems that, even if the victim were *not* to suffer, the act of humiliation, according to the Kantian, would be just as illegitimate. The perpetrator would still be mounting an assault on the victim’s humanity, its success in no way correlated with the victim’s psychological experience. Suffering of the victim, in other words, is not a ground for condemning humiliation. On the other hand, one might add, if suffering should play any role in the prohibition of humiliation, the Kantian account does not attempt to explain the source of that suffering.
- These difficulties are not insurmountable. They would not be sufficient on their own to dismiss the Kantian and semi-Kantian accounts of dignity. Still, they are sufficient to motivate a search for an alternative interpretation. The broadly naturalistic approach I pursue here builds on two general premises. One is methodological: ethical reasoning should be continuous with the reasoning in natural sciences. It should necessarily take into account what natural sciences

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1 I am grateful to the anonymous referee for helpful comments on the earlier draft of this paper.

2 See Darwall (2006:119–150) and Margalit (1996:57–75).

tell us about the behaviour and constitution of humans. As such, it follows the findings of contemporary biology and empirical psychology. The second assumption is substantive. The naturalistic approach sees a human individual as wholly a part of nature, and specifically, of the animal kingdom. Man is subject to the forces of natural selection. To understand human behaviour we have to look at it through the lens of evolution. The institution of morality, moral judgements, norms, and intuitions, can only be made intelligible if we locate them within the evolutionary process. The model I shall propose contrasts humiliation with shame and aligns it with embarrassment. Acts of humiliation aim at damaging and destroying the victim's cooperative value, thus severely hampering his chances of survival and reproduction. Pain is an appropriate reaction to such acts. Finally, the moral ban on humiliation should be justified entirely by reference to the pain it causes.

Many writers, from Hobbes onward, noted our exceptional sensitivity to slights, rebukes, insults by others. Various explanations have been suggested, but the path to a correct one, I think, goes through a distinction between two kinds of occasions on which we display such sensitivity. Suppose, for instance, I find a diary my grandfather kept for the last ten years before his death. In it there are reflections on my life and my character. In the course of his thoughtful remarks the grandfather comes to the conclusion that I am lazy and dishonest. Since I think of myself as honest and hard-working, I am understandably upset. As I value my grandfather's judgement, I am prompted to examine my own character. Eventually I realise how right he was, and I resolve to change myself to the better.

In a rather different scenario, suppose that I find myself together with my uncle among distant acquaintances with whom we occasionally play tennis. I have sufficient respect for my uncle; I sufficiently value the mental and moral qualities of our tennis partners. As the conversation takes an unusual turn, my uncle begins questioning my integrity, as well as my working habits. I react with anger, and we nearly come to blows. I vow to never talk to him again.

When all the variables are taken into account, the evident difference between the two scenarios is that the former one unfolds in private. It is not far-fetched to think that the grandfather's diary caused damage to my self-esteem. An emotional reaction to that damage was *shame*. And because I was ashamed of my character flaws, I initiated the process of self-improvement. Shame is thus aligned with reflection and self-examination.

A very similar criticism on a public occasion yielded rather different results. Here we want to say that my uncle caused my *humiliation*: I was humiliated in front of those acquaintances. In fact I might have been humiliated even if there were no observers around, other than the uncle himself. No self-examination accompanied my experience, or followed it later on. My emotional response was immediate and instinctive. Even if there were any such self-examination, I might have found no fault with myself. My self-esteem would have been intact. Perhaps, however, you are not convinced. Perhaps you want to say that I was *embarrassed*, rather than humiliated. To embarrass someone is a minor offence. The experience of embarrassment is mildly distressing. It is indeed tied to a social occasion. 'Humiliation' should be reserved for most serious assaults on my very humanity. It is only incidentally tied to a social occasion, if at all.

Some might find this elevated view of humiliation compelling<sup>3</sup>. Instead of pitting my intuitions against theirs, let me follow their lead and first give a naturalistic analysis of embarrassment. I will attempt to show that, once properly interpreted, embarrassment should be seen as being on a par with humiliation. Situations of embarrassment and humiliation are of the same kind.

## **2. Shame, humiliation, embarrassment**

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3 See Margalit (1996).

Both are situations of social exclusion. The only significant difference is the scale—of offence, of suffering, and of lasting damage.

- 3. Self-presentation** To understand, therefore, the phenomenon of embarrassment, begin with the notion of social interaction. Conversation is a paradigmatic instance of interaction, yet we cast the net much more widely. Exchanging glances on the street, riding on a bus—all of these are also its instances. Being merely in the presence of others, where your presence is routinely observed, would be the fundamental unit of interaction. Every participant in such interaction comes equipped with a set of expectations of how he should behave in it and, on the other hand, how others are supposed to behave as well. Through his behaviour, passive or active, he presents himself to others. Not only does he have his own expectations of his own self-presentation, but also he has an idea of what expectations others have formed of *his* self-presentation. The object of embarrassment is the person's self-presentation<sup>4</sup>. This elusive concept can be explicated as a way of carrying myself in public. I present myself as someone deserving a certain treatment from others in accordance with my expectations. I expect and demand that treatment from others. Let us say that, while in public, I project a 'self-presenting image'. A major concern of the interaction participant is to protect and maintain the self-presenting image. So it is not only the actual physical treatment I receive from others (words, gestures, physical contact) that is the focus of my concern, but also the opinions that others may have formed of me. Only rarely is my construction of that image deliberate and planned. On most occasions, it is habitual and instinctive, and its parameters are not clearly articulated. Sometimes I present myself as an intelligent individual, sometimes as a funny one, and often as a courteous one. But without exception I want to be seen as someone capable of maintaining the interaction. I want to be in control of my impulses, and I loathe to be the one causing the smooth flow of interaction to cease. When in this fashion I cause an interruption, my self-presenting image is damaged. By the same token, I can embarrass someone else—which is another way of saying that I can damage someone else's self-presenting image. Why embarrassment, being a reaction to the damage of self-presenting image, should be painful is hardly mysterious. Social interactions serve to initiate, maintain, and terminate our relationships with other people. The person's qualities are manifested in those interactions—if not exclusively, then primarily so. It is essential for the well-being of any person to have good relationships with people. Even if we imagine a person materially independent of other people, it is not possible for anyone to be emotionally completely independent of them. Interaction, then, is a essential element in cooperation, a vital condition of survival and well-being. Now, a damage to the agent's self-presenting image is a sign that the agent is not successful in conducting the interaction. A mild such damage does not indeed rule him out as a future partner in interaction, but it places a question mark over his capacity all the same. Slipping on a street is not sufficient for casting you outside of the society. It is nevertheless a sign of clumsiness, or perhaps of ill health. Neither of these qualities would increase your value in future cooperative activities. Beyond this sort of slightest damage, this is clearer in a conversation when a silly remark, or a tasteless joke, throw a conversation off-balance. No one knows how to react, and the author of the remark is no longer seen, at least at that moment, as belonging to the group involved in the interaction.

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<sup>4</sup> The concept of self-presentation is derived from Velleman (2006a). However, I draw differently the lines connecting it with shame, embarrassment, and self-esteem. My understanding of embarrassment is heavily influenced by Goffman (1967c) and Goffman (1967a). For other views on the nature of embarrassment see Keltner and Buswell (1997).

'Being in an embarrassing situation is painful.' Commonsensical as it might sound, this statement raises two questions. Is the talk of pain here metaphorical at best, or are we talking of real, literal pain? And secondly, whatever the status of pain mentioned here is, how does it fit into the explanatory pattern outlined above? It is tempting to think that pain occasioned by embarrassment and pain occasioned, say, by burning are different physiological processes. The former is simply a variation of sadness, a particular mood. The latter is pain properly speaking, associated with physical injury.

Recent research undermines the possibility of any such distinction. Begin with the function of physical pain: why should any such capacity for the subjective experience of pain have evolved? It is tempting to think of pain as an indicator of a problem. If you are injured, pain allows you to pinpoint the location of injury that is the source of pain. But this seems false at least in the case of internal pain. If you have gastrointestinal pain, you will not be able to find its source merely by introspection. The experience of pain cannot direct you toward its own source. The capacity for experiencing physical pain has not evolved to enable us to identify the source of malfunction (e.g., a damaged organ).

More promising is to think of pain as an evolutionary instrument for alerting us to a problem in our body and for initiating a sequence of behavioural reactions<sup>5</sup>. Escape from, or removal of, possibly harmful (pain-producing) stimulations, inhibition of activities that might delay recovery are among them. Its other role is in avoiding potentially damaging situations (and showing others the effects of those situations). It is not merely that, without a pain experience, I would not be able to tell that my hand is burning, with the resulting damage to tissue and bone. More importantly, I would not necessarily avoid the damage of tissue and bone: after all, it requires some non-trivial competence to understand how this damage threatens the survival of the organism.

The pain of embarrassment, the subjective experience we provisionally call 'pain', can be interpreted in a similar way. A damage to cooperative value increases chances of social exclusion. It thus restricts our access to material resources, with the ensuing threat to our survival. The pain of embarrassment serves as a signal that something went, or is going, wrong in the social interaction. Without the pain of embarrassment we would not have known of the damage to our self-presenting image. As in the case of physical pain, the pain of embarrassment ensures that we will try to avoid this behaviour on other occasions. And in addition, a manifestation of embarrassment teaches others as well that such behaviour should be avoided.

There is, in other words, a nearly perfect match in the ultimate explanations of physical pain and of the pain of embarrassment. Is there a match in their proximate explanations that would cite the underlying psychological or physiological factors of particular experiences? Without taking a far-reaching stand in the philosophy of mind, the question is whether the same psychological and physiological processes can be associated with the two subjective experiences of pain. Embarrassing situations are situations of social exclusion of the embarrassed individual: the failure to protect one's self-presenting image diminishes the cooperative value of that individual. The individual is facing a threat of being excluded from the group involved in the given interaction. With this assumption granted, embarrassment pain becomes what the psychologists call 'social pain', a subjective experience accompanying social exclusion. Recent studies demonstrated a significant overlap, at the level of brain circuitry, between socially painful and physically painful experiences<sup>6</sup>. The same regions of

#### **4. Physical pain and social pain**

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<sup>5</sup> See Bateson (1991:829), Dennis and Melzack (1983:153ff), and Wall (1979:257).

<sup>6</sup> See Eisenberger (2012).

the brain are activated in the two types of experience. Further remarkable correlations have been demonstrated. Factors increasing physical pain have been found to increase social pain. Factors increasing social pain also increase physical pain. The same two correlations hold for the decrease of the relevant kinds of pain.

The precise correlations are still a matter of active research. A philosophical conclusion for us to draw at this stage should be this. Embarrassment is accompanied by a kind of pain that is no less real than physical pain, the kind of pain accompanying damage to tissue and bones. A normative implication follows: a deliberate attempt to embarrass a person can be prohibited on the same grounds as a deliberate attempt to injure a person.

### 5. Humiliation reconsidered

Embarrassment, I have now claimed, is a response to the situation of a failure to meet the expectations of the participants in a social interaction, as understood by the embarrassed agent himself. Its proximate cause is the concern for self-presentation in the given interaction. Its ultimate cause is the decrease of cooperative value. The pain of embarrassment is a form of social pain.

We can now substantiate the claim advertised in §2: humiliation is embarrassment writ large. Both involve damage to self-presentation. An act of humiliation is a deliberate attempt to damage a person's self-presenting image. Of course sometimes we say that a person humiliated himself, just as we might say that a person embarrassed himself. In both cases the person is understood to have unintentionally humiliated or embarrassed himself. And so, properly speaking, there is no action involved, but merely a series of accidents creating a situation of humiliation. This situation is characterised by a damage caused to the self-presenting image of the given person. The emotion of humiliation is the response of the humiliated person to the situation of humiliation.

The extreme ease with which we can be humiliated is parallel to the ease with which we can be embarrassed, or embarrass ourselves. At stake is our self-presenting image and, in consequence, our cooperative value. Humiliation and embarrassment are phenomena of the same kind differing only in intensity. An extensive damage to self-presenting image is humiliation. An intense pain felt in response to it is the pain of humiliation. However, are there any substantive reasons we can give for this conceptual identification of embarrassment and humiliation? The vernacular that often merges the two terms and their cognates is not a reliable guide. Introspection fares no better: occurrent mental states are too similar to tell them apart<sup>7</sup>.

There are, I think, two ways of showing embarrassment and humiliation to be of the same kind. One is to contrast both with shame, another emotion often conflated with them. As the example in §2 has shown, shame is a response to a drop of self-esteem. It is an emotion aligned with reflection. As I reflect on my shortcomings displayed in a given situation, my self-esteem drops. Shame follows as an emotional response. Shame, on this view, will be a reflective emotion, an outcome of a reflective self-examination. In recalling my past behaviour, or even my thoughts, I can realise how wrong they were, how I failed to live up to the ideals constituting my self-esteem. No presence of an actual audience is required. This is not possible with either humiliation or embarrassment: I cannot experience these emotions in solitude<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Situations of extreme public humiliation do elicit strong feelings, situations of average embarrassment elicit weaker ones. It remains unclear, I think, whether the difference is of quality, not merely of degree. This is confirmed by our linguistic intuitions. On many occasions, 'He humiliated me' can be substituted, without sounding inappropriate, for 'He embarrassed me', and *vice versa*. If the feelings were clearly distinct, these substitutions could not easily pass.

<sup>8</sup> The possibility of solitary shame was forcefully defended in Williams (1993).

Moreover, these emotions are emphatically not the products of self-evaluation. They are immediate responses to certain kinds of situations, namely, situations liable to decrease one's cooperative value.

The second reason for aligning embarrassment with humiliation is the unique role of ridicule in both of them. Flipping on the street is often funny—so much so that polite observers are required to contain their laughter in order not to embarrass the person on the ground. Alas, he is already embarrassed, in part because he realises how ridiculous he looks. In Agatha Christie's novel, Lady Edgware misunderstands the expression 'judgement of Paris' taking 'Paris' to refer to the city and its world of fashion, rather than to the son of Priam. It is a *faux pas* creating embarrassment, but also liable to provoke laughter among the less reserved onlookers. Her Ladyship's boorishness is a thing to poke fun at. If laughter is elicited and encouraged, we are in the terrain of humiliation. Ridicule is its most potent weapon.

Why should that be so? In line with the present methodology, we ought to understand the evolutionary function of humour. There is a whole array of competing accounts available<sup>9</sup>. They fall into two broad categories. Some highlight the competitive and somewhat menacing side of humour. Others insist on the continuity between humour and play, and on its softer, pleasant aspects. As a representative of the first category of views, consider the ostracism theory due to Richard Alexander<sup>10</sup>. The capacity for laughter and the trait enabling us to appreciate humour, according to it, have evolved to decrease the social status of the object of a joke (to take one instance of a humorous activity). It simultaneously aimed to increase or reinforce the social status of the joke teller and of his audience. Both capacities originate in grooming and tickling among primates. These latter activities were from the beginning designed to establish and maintain bonding between individuals: grooming requires time and effort. One necessarily has to be selective in choosing one's grooming partners. Bonding is thus necessarily exclusive. Humour as we know it inherits these ancient features. It is supposed to enhance the social bonds among the individuals sharing, e.g., a joke. It simultaneously is supposed to exclude, or 'ostracise', the individuals who are the objects of the jokes and of other humorous activities, such as puns.

A representative of the second category is a view advanced by Gervais and Wilson<sup>11</sup>. Essential to these authors' approach is the distinction between Duchenne and non-Duchenne laughter. The fundamental trait that modern humans inherited from early hominids is the ability to react to a certain type of stimuli and to experience positive emotions. This is a characteristic of Duchenne laughter. It is genetically transmitted: infants are able to laugh without being taught to do so. The evolutionary origins of Duchenne laughter, as in Alexander's theory, are located in the primates' activities of grooming and tickling. The ultimate evolutionary cause of Duchenne laughter, however, is not ostracism and bonding, but rather play and unexpected social situations that are not life-threatening. It is of course unclear how play can fail to have a bonding function. And if it is bonding, then this should come at the expense of bonding with others, and hence necessarily involve ostracism. The latter notion should be weak enough, as indeed it is according to Alexander, to involve a mere *de facto* exclusion of individuals from the given activity by the group. It is in this sense not a hostile act. If, on the other hand, we curtail the notion of ostracism to include only deliberate, hostile acts aimed at preventing individuals from being part of the group, then Duchenne laughter can no longer accompany ostracism.

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<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Alexander (1986), Weisfeld (1993), Gruner (1979), Gervais and Wilson (2005), Provine (2012). For a critical review see Martin (2007).

<sup>10</sup> See Alexander (1986).

<sup>11</sup> See Gervais and Wilson (2005).



A laughter accompanying hostile acts of ostracism is not a direct response to stimulus and is not associated with that positive emotion alternatively termed ‘mirth’ or ‘joy’. The hostile, deliberate act of ostracism may involve a strategic deployment of laughter—i.e. a different kind of it, a non-Duchenne laughter.

According to both approaches, therefore, humour is a major instrument of social exclusion. This is due either to the fact that the ultimate cause in the development of humour consisted in creating such an instrument, or to the fact that humour’s ultimate cause (play) had an incidental feature which could be exploited to promote social exclusion. Being made fun of is painful because it is a sign of one’s alienation from a group.

### 6. Normative implications

We have now isolated a cluster of the situations of social exclusion and the associated emotional responses. Contained in it are insult, ridicule, embarrassment, and humiliation. Experiences of the subjects in these situations is quite literally painful. There is, as we have seen, more than one way to draw an analogy with physical pain. Similarities are observed or inferred in behavioural patterns, evolutionary explanations, and neurochemical responses. Based on these findings, there is a straightforward suggestion to make. Deliberate acts of exclusion are acts of torture, a deliberate infliction of pain. They are painful to their victims in much the same way that acts of physical torture are. Thus, the prohibition on humiliation should be based on the prohibition on inflicting unnecessary pain. If the boundary between social pain and physical pain can be drawn only arbitrarily, then infliction of social pain can only be as permissible as infliction of physical pain. That much is warranted by a naturalist analysis of the exclusion cluster and of the emotions associated with it.

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